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*Professors admonished in the Day of Calamity: or
the Lord's Controversy with Israel.*

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S E R M O N

PREACHED AT THE
MEETING-HOUSE, in Little Moorfields,

On the 4th of *February*, 1780,

Being the Day appointed for a

G E N E R A L F A S T.

By WILLIAM BENNET.

L O N D O N:

Printed for J. BUCKLAND, in Pater-noster-Row.

M.DCC.LXXX.





MICAH VI. 2.

HEAR YE, O MOUNTAINS, THE LORD'S CONTROVERSY, AND YE STRONG FOUNDATIONS OF THE EARTH: FOR THE LORD HATH A CONTROVERSY WITH HIS PEOPLE, AND HE WILL PLEAD WITH ISRAEL.

IT is matter of deep lamentation that, when a people are the most ripe for destruction, they are generally the least affected with the cause of their calamities. Notwithstanding the loudest calls and admonitions of providence, they sleep on in profound security, till threatened vengeance overtakes them like a flood, and sweeps them away with sudden desolation.

This was the affecting case with the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, to which

this prophecy refers under the names of Samaria and Jerusalem; when the Lord, for their idolatry and wickedness, was about to visit them with his judgments, first in the captivity of the ten tribes, by the Assyrians, and afterwards in that of Judah, by the Chaldeans. Often were the prophets sent to forewarn them of approaching desolation, and plead with them to forsake the evil of their ways; but they always turned a deaf ear to their admonitions, and boldly persisted in their provoking impieties. A spirit of slumber and infatuation had seized them, which steeled their breasts against conviction, and hardened their hearts against fear. The prophets seemed unto them but as those that mocked, or that wanted to disturb their repose with groundless alarms, and therefore they despised both their persons and predictions.

On this account, we find the prophet Micah, by divine direction, repeatedly addressing himself to the rocks and "mountains," to "the hills," and "foundations of the earth," as if these were more suscep-

tible of impressi^{on} than the hearts of backsliding Israel. In this also there might be some reference to their worshipping of idols upon the hills, which by that means were polluted, and are therefore called in as parties in the solemn contest; but, without dispute, the grand design hereof was to expose the gross stupidity of the people, and to express the great earnestness and zeal of the prophet, in the cause of God. He speaks, therefore, with a fervor and vehemence as great, as though he would make even rocks and mountains listen to his call; he speaks publicly before the whole creation, as being neither afraid nor ashamed to bear a faithful testimony against sin; and, speaking *from* the heart, he wishes to speak *to* the heart, that the impressi^{on} might be effectual and abiding. He directs his address also to “the mountains and the strong foundations of the earth,” to intimate hereby, that the message he was about to deliver in the name of God, was of the most serious consequence, and deeply interesting to all from the highest to the lowest;

lowest ; from the King upon the throne to the meanest subject in the realm. “ Hear ye, O mountains, the Lord’s controversy, and ye strong foundations of the earth”—‘ Give ear,’ q. d. ‘ all ye inhabitants of the land, of what age character and station soever ye may be, listen to the solemn message I am directed to deliver, and let it sink deep into all your minds ; or, if ye be stout hearted and refuse to listen, let rocks attend and reverberate the sound, let mountains bow and rend before the Lord, let the foundations of the earth tremble, and shake you from your guilty slumbers, let the whole creation be witness betwixt you and God :’ “ For the Lord hath a controversy with his people, and he will plead with Israel.”—Thus the prophets of old faithfully and boldly stood forth, in the times of approaching calamity and judgment, to “ shew Jacob their transgressions and the house of Israel their sins.” And thus it becomes all, that would approve themselves faithful
unto

unto God and the souls of men, to “cry
 “aloud and spare not” in reproofing sin,
 wheresoever it is found, but more especially
 when it abounds among the Lord’s
 professing people. For sin, and particularly
 that of the house of Israel, is
 “the abominable thing which his soul
 “hateth,” and the principal procuring
 cause of national judgments to a professing
 people.

There is, therefore, in the text, a special
 emphasis laid upon the relation which
 Israel stood in towards God, as what
 greatly aggravated their transgressions, and
 drew forth against them the resentment of
 the Almighty. They were *his people*; such
 as he had selected from all the nations of
 the earth to be his peculiar inheritance—to
 whom he had especially revealed his
 grace and loving-kindness—for whom he
 had wrought very wonderful salvations—
 on whom he had conferred the greatest
 honors and privileges—and with whom
 he had established his gracious covenant.
 Their iniquities and backslidings, therefore,
 were, in his sight, peculiarly heinous
 and

and offensive; forasmuch as they were aggravated by all those circumstances of ingratitude and violated obligation, which were not to be found in the sins of surrounding nations. This the prophet was careful to remind them of, and to ground the Lord's controversy upon, that it might have the more humbling effect on their minds, and that the divine procedure might appear the more equitable, in the destruction of a people so deeply laden with the vilest of all sins, *ingratitude and rebellion.*

And, in this view, the words of our text might be considered and improved as very applicable to the circumstances of *this* guilty nation, which is now evidently under the frowns and displeasure of the Almighty. For though we cannot, as a people, pretend that any such particular relation doth subsist between us and God, as did of old between him and the Jews; yet we of this British isle have been the distinguished objects of divine goodness, both in providence and grace, above most surrounding nations. What remarkable
salvations

salvations hath the Lord wrought for us, when seemingly on the verge of total ruin! How eminently hath he blessed us with the bounties of the earth and seas! How hath he emancipated us from the shackles of Popish tyranny! And above all, how hath he owned and blessed his gospel among us, to the gathering and preparing a people for himself! In these and many other respects, we are a nation exalted high above those around us, and richly favored of the Lord. Our sins and transgressions, therefore, like those of Israel, are greatly aggravated; and the Lord is justly sore displeased with us, above other kingdoms, for backsliding and revolting from him, as we shamefully have done.—Here we might run great lengths in pointing out the grounds of that controversy, which the Lord hath with us as a people at large, or the crying sins and abominations of the land, which have awakened his displeasure against us, and brought upon us all the judgments and calamities we are under; such as, gaming, leudness, extravagance, bribery, swearing, B sabbath-

sabbath-breaking, and the like. These and such others are the crying sins and abominations of the land, for which it groans beneath the weight of the Lord's anger, and for which, as a people, we must be humbled before God, or we shall be broken with the rod of his strength.

But allow me, my friends, on this occasion, to consider and apply the words in a more restricted sense; yet such as will not make them appear less affecting and important, but the contrary: to apply them, I mean, with an especial reference to the *professors of religion and the Lord's own people*, who stand in a much nearer relation to him, and whose conduct always weighs greatly with him in national dispensations. The Lord hath undoubtedly a controversy with his churches, with his ministers, with his people. He is displeased with many things which he beholds sinful in their spirit and conduct, and for their sakes, more especially, is he now contending with us as a people. On this account, ought every church and every soul, that professeth to keep a

5

day

day of humiliation before God, to be abased and afflicted in his sight; and, while we lament, in general, the crying sins of the nation, *this* should especially be kept in view as the grand procuring cause of all our heavy visitations. For, true it is, that the people of God are “the salt of the earth,” and that, according to the state of these, the Lord regulates, in great measure, his providential dealings with kingdoms and states at large. While the salt retains its flavour as a quickening purifying principle, it preserves the body politic in some considerable degree from putrefaction and destruction; but when once “the salt has lost its flavour,” that is, when the people of God lose that spirituality, zeal, and holiness, which are pleasing in his sight—when religion in its vital power declines, and its professors sink into carnality, deadness, and sinful conformity to the world, events have often proved how much a nation at large has been chastised and afflicted on that account. The Lord has taken this method of visiting by temporal judgments, that he

might rouse his own people from their stupor, and quicken among his churches a spirit of prayer and supplication.

Let me, then, on this solemn occasion, lead your thoughts more particularly into this channel, and join with you in lamenting the sad calamities of Zion.—And is it needful, that I adduce arguments to prove that the Lord, in this conjuncture, hath a controversy with his people in particular? Let us only look to the inconsiderable success of a preached gospel among our different churches, and *that* will yield proof sufficient to justify the observation. Time was, when “the word of the Lord” ran and was glorified—when seldom a sermon was preached, but some sinner was “pricked to the heart,” and awakened to an earnest concern about salvation—when the ministers of Christ rejoiced in the abundant success of their labours, seeing the word effectual, through the Spirit, to “the pulling down strong holds,” and laying sinners in the dust at the feet of mercy—when there was a great ingathering of the people unto Christ, and
converts

converts flocked to the churches, "like
 " doves unto their windows." Then the
 Lord rested as a glory upon his churches,
 and the outgoings of his power were evi-
 dent in the sanctuary; then Sabbaths were
 days of conquest over the enemies of King
 Jesus; " the priests of the Lord were
 " clothed with salvation, and his peo-
 " ple shouted aloud for joy:" God from
 on high spake efficaciously by his servants,
 and their " word was sharper than a two-
 " edged sword;" the gospel preached in
 faithfulness, was set home upon the heart
 with power, and became " a favour of life
 unto life" to multitudes of precious souls.
 —But, oh! is this the case now with our dif-
 ferent churches and congregations? Doth
 the Lord now ride forth so triumphantly
 in the chariot of salvation conquering
 and to conquer? Is the word preached
 effectual, as it was in former times, to
 the " opening blind eyes, and unstopping
 " deaf ears?" Are there such numbers
 " convinced of sin" under sermons, as
 there used to be? Are there such instances
 of conversion in families, as we have heard
 our

our fathers speak of? Do ministers preach with that life and energy they once did, or is their word accompanied with the same success to souls? Is it not a truth, that few comparatively are called; that “the arm of the Lord is” but seldom “revealed;” that the word is dispensed with very little success? It is, and we must all acknowledge it, a solemn and affecting truth, which fills the hearts of the faithful with discouragement and grief. And, whence, why, wherefore, is it thus, in our various assemblies both in town and country? Is “the Lord’s ear heavy that he cannot hear, or his arm shortened that he cannot save?” No; “but our iniquities have separated between God and his churches, and caused him to hide good things from us.” His Spirit has been grieved and dishonored by professors, and therefore he has, in great measure, withdrawn his influence from the churches. Ministers, though faithful, are left to preach more in their own strength; a spirit of prayer is quenched among the people; and hence it is that the gospel hath

hath no greater success. An awful and affecting proof, that “the Lord hath a controversy with his people!”

So again, if we look into the frames and experience of those “who have believed through grace,” what sad declensions, what deadness, what darkness, what distance from God, do they generally complain of! How little communion with him, either in secret or in public! How little of that life and power, of that consolation and full assurance, which in times past so much abounded in the churches! How seldom do God’s people experience that delight and holy rapture in the ordinances of his house, which of old was felt and known by the followers of Christ! I appeal to the aged, who have had a long standing in the church of God; whether the state of religion is not now very different to what it was in former days; whether the Spirit of the Lord is not greatly restrained; whether there is that spirituality, that liveliness, that comfort, that holy rejoicing, among the people of God, which were formerly seen and experienced?

perienced? Is not the prevailing cry with them, ‘ O my leanness, my leanness! O
 • my coldness and carnality of affection!
 • O my hardness and insensibility of heart!
 • O my uncomfortable lifeless frames!’—

And what then can be a stronger evidence that “ the Lord hath a controversy with
 “ his people?” He is the same God now that he ever was. His covenant, his promises, his power, his grace, his Spirit, his word, his ordinances, are the same in themselves they ever were. But, though a father, he may frown and chastise his people, if he be dishonored and offended; and *this*, Sirs, is manifestly the cause of that withdrawment of his gracious comforting presence from them, which is now so universally lamented. He beholds iniquity in Jacob. He is displeased with the sins of Israel. His professing people have done evil in his sight. His Spirit has been grieved in the house of his friends. His churches have alienated themselves from him. His saints have too much intermixed with the world. And therefore he has withdrawn himself from them,
 that

that “in their affliction they may seek
“him early*.”

Several other particulars might be mentioned, as evidences and proofs, that “the Lord hath a controversy with his
“people;” but I will content myself with instancing only in this, *the returning spread of Popery*, which has often been the instrument in the Lord’s hand of chastising and afflicting his church, for their sins and departures from himself. This no one can view with insensibility and unconcern, who has any knowledge, either of the thing itself, or of the awful effects and consequences it produceth. For what is Popery, but a system of anti-christian doctrines, which derogate from the glory of the great Redeemer, and tend to the destruction of the souls of men; enslaving to the conscience, and subversive of all liberty civil and religious; a diabolical engine to support the pride and blasphemy of one “that exalteth himself
“above all that is called God †,” to establish the spiritual tyranny of rapacious haughty priests, and to encourage the most

* Hof. v. 15.

† 2 Theff. ii. 4.

abandoned licentiousness among the people? —And where Popery has ever triumphed in a Christian Protestant country, how has it marked its way with the blood of thousands and tens of thousands, wantonly butchered to glut the greedy rage of bigotry, and inhumanly tortured by the fangs of this infernal monster! The history of our own, as well as other countries, is a mirror that reflects (and may it reflect to posterity yet unborn!) the genuine spirit of the papal system, as “breathing out” cruelty and “slaughter against” all “the true disciples of” Christ. —Is it not, then, a further affecting proof of the Lord’s controversy with his churches, that he is suffering this their avowed enemy, once again, to rear its head, and threaten to overspread the realm? The means, by which it has obtained the encouragement and boldness it now assumes, it is not for me to determine on this occasion; but let it never be forgotten, that, whatever they be, they can proceed no further than the hand of providence permits: it is ultimately therefore

fore from the Lord that Popery springs afresh within this highly favored realm; and the end hereof may be to chastise his churches for, and purge them from, their sins. What are the designs of providence none of us can tell, but surely we ought to consider the alarming spread, which its errors are daily making, as a collateral evidence, at least, of the Lord's displeasure, and, thus viewed, it ought to humble and confound us in the dust before his throne.

Having thus spoken briefly to the *fact*, which is, that the Lord hath a controversy with his professing people, let us in the next place advert a little to the *grounds* or *causes* of it; which will lead us to enquire, what are the prevailing sins of God's people at the present day; and why their sins are so much more heinous in his sight than those of others?

Controversies, among men, often spring from misunderstandings or imaginary grounds, but never so the Lord's controversy with his creatures. Sin is always the procuring cause, on their part, which

fully justifies his procedure against them. And so it is in the present case, where we have seen, from various considerations, that the Lord is displeased and holds a controversy with his people. It is not with those that profess his name as it ought to be. They have dishonored, displeased, and openly sinned against him; and, on this account, he is coming out of his place against us, as a people.—Is it asked, what is the evil which is found among the churches? I cannot but reply, it is manifold and various. One thing in particular, which calls for deep and universal lamentation, is, that *shameful conformity to the world*, which is almost every where so observable in the persons and families of professors. An evil *this*, so great and prevalent, that it is become difficult to distinguish between those who call themselves Christians, and such as make no pretensions to religion. How common is it, for instance, to see members of churches and professors of religion running into all the extravagances and fopperies of dress and fashion; and, instead of training up their children

children in the fear of the Lord and the love of holiness, by instilling into their tender minds the salutary principles of the gospel, fostering them in pride, and leading them into scenes of gaiety and pleasure! How many, that call themselves believers, so far set at naught the authority of Christ, as to chuse their connections for life among the carnal and unregenerate, for the sake of opulence and grandeur, though they are expressly enjoined to “marry only in the Lord*!” And are there no professors in our day, who can sit down with carnal worldly company, to amuse themselves with cards, and suffer card-tables in their houses, which are an inlet to all sorts of gaming and extravagance? Yea, are there none who frequent Play-houses and other places, which either minister to, or become the occasions of, dissipation and vice? Are there none who are outliving their circumstances, in order to make a figure in the world, and, to support this, fall in with undue methods and artifices of gain? O my friends, if we cast our eyes among professors at large, we may,

* 1 Cor. vii. 39.

in all these points of worldly conformity; see cause to cry out with the prophet,
 “ Oh that my head were waters, and
 “ mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I
 “ might weep day and night for the slain
 “ of the daughter of my people* !” There
 is, now, no more that separation from the
 ways and maxims of the world, which so
 signalized the professors of the last age;
 and which, though it brought upon them
 the opprobrious name of *Puritans*, was an
 ornament to their cause, the glory of their
 churches, and the terror of their enemies.
 The question, now, with most seems to be,
 not, how shall I best “ abstain from all
 “ appearance of evil,” and so prove my-
 self a child of God; but, how far may I
 deviate from the ways of a strict walk
 and becoming conversation, without for-
 feiting my reputation, as a professor? And
 thus we see multitudes continually borne
 away by the rapid stream of gaiety and sin-
 ful pleasure, to the discredit and reproach
 of the name of Christians.

There are also other evils that may be
 classed among the crying sins of professors

* Jer. ix. 1.

at the present day, both of a public and private nature, which many fall into who are helped to avoid this sinful conformity to the world. Among these I may reckon the neglect of gospel ordinances, or a slighting church fellowship and privileges, with an unsteadiness of profession; which not only greatly discourages faithful ministers, but withholds that honor which is due to Christ before the world. This, though many plausible reasons may be suggested in its excuse, is one of those practices among professors, which are directly contrary to the precepts and examples of scripture*, subversive of that allegiance which is due to Christ as the Great King and head of his church, and injurious to the peace, stability, and progressive holiness, of believers; which, therefore, cannot be pleasing but displeasing unto God.

So also is that negligence in domestic instruction and family worship, in which too many professors allow themselves; a sin that is hateful in the sight of the Almighty, and for which he now holds a controversy

* Heb. x. 25. 2 Cor. viii. 5. Acts ii. 41, 42.

with his people. Not that I would be understood to mean a total neglect of family worship, (though I am afraid, that there are many professors who live in this heathenish way) but a careless and indolent performance of it; which is, when heads of families, besides praying with and for their children and domestics, do not also make conscience of catechizing and instructing them in the great truths and principles of the gospel, and endeavour to win their hearts to "the obedience of faith;" studying to guard their minds against errors and temptations, to restrain them from every forbidden path, to engage their affections for God, and to make them fall in love with holiness by the amiableness of their own spirit and conduct. This was what Abraham was renowned for of old; and this was what particularly engaged the care and attention of our forefathers the *Puritans*, who well judged, that the foundation of religion is often laid in early instruction, and that domestic piety and devotion contribute no less to the cause of

of holiness than a regular attendance on public ordinances. But it is much, much indeed, to be lamented, that this in too many families is now laid aside, and the heads thereof content themselves with spending a few minutes every day, in offering up petitions and confessions unto God, which, for want of this instruction, their children and servants often do not understand. Hence they are suffered to grow up and come forth into the world, which is full of snares, with minds unprincipled, defenceless, and open to all kinds of temptation; and thus the children, who were solemnly devoted to God in baptism, and whom, on account of their relation to his church, he claims as his own, are drawn aside from the ways of religion, and drowned in the follies and vices of the age: which it is easy to conceive must be grievous and offensive to the Lord.

Not is this all that may be brought in charge against professors of the present day. We may descend a step lower, following them individually into their private conduct and secret duties, and therein see

matter of just complaint which the Lord has to plead with them for. Their want of watchfulness, gravity, spirituality in conversation, disengagement from the world, zeal, and frequency in prayer, may be brought against them, as the ground of divine controversy and rebuke. For, in none of these respects, is it with God's people now as it ought to be, or as it was in former times. They are "settled on their lees," like "Moab;" they have mixed themselves among the people, as "Ephraim;" and they have imbibed a formal lukewarm spirit, like "the Laodiceans."

And doth any one need to put the question, why the sins of professors are so much more heinous in the sight of God than those of others? They violate the most sacred and solemn obligations; they sin against greater light and privilege; they intermingle with every act of disobedience much more ingratitude than others can; and their compliances with temptation, or neglect of an holy walk and conversation, have more extensive and pernicious

cious influence than those of unregenerate carnal men, who make no pretensions to religion; for they bring a reproach upon the good ways of Christ, they depreciate the credit of the gospel, they encourage and confirm others in sinful courses, they give occasion for wicked and prophane scoffers to blaspheme, and they furnish hell itself with matter of infernal joy and triumph.

What then, let us enquire by way of *Improvement*, doth this view of the subject suggest? Is it not incumbent on us, one and all, to call his own soul to a serious and close examination before God, saying, in the language of the prophet Jeremiah, "What have *I* done?" How have *I* contributed to that load of guilt which lies upon us as a people? What particular sin or evil have *I* given way to, or lived in, at which the Lord is displeased?—This is the end that God aims at in his frowning dispensations, to awaken each of us from our spiritual slumber, to quicken us to self-enquiry, and so to humble us in the dust before his throne. And here—

in must all true *national* repentance begin ; not in lodging general charges against the people at large, but in each man's bringing the touchstone to his own heart and conduct, and confessing and forsaking his own evil ways.—Do we then, as a church, profess to spend this day as a season of humiliation before the Lord? let us turn our eyes in upon ourselves, and examine, what it is in *us* for which God is contending with us ; let us lie low in the dust for our own abominations ; let us take shame to ourselves, for personal backslidings and personal sins ; and let our earnest cry to the Lord, on this occasion, be, “ pardon *my* iniquity, for it is great.” O that the same spirit of contrition might be found among us, that was found with the people of Israel in the day of their calamity, when the Lord said concerning them, “ Surely I have heard Ephraim bemoaning
 “ himself thus, Thou hast chastised me
 “ and I was chastised, as a bullock un-
 “ accustomed to the yoke : turn thou me
 “ and I shall be turned, for thou art the
 “ Lord my God : surely after that I was
 “ turned

“ turned, I repented; and after that I
 “ was instructed, I smote upon my thigh:
 “ I was ashamed, yea, even confounded,
 “ because I did bear the reproach of
 “ my youth*.” May we all thus be
 humbled under a sense of sin, and turn
 unto the Lord our God with evangelical
 sorrow and supplication!—Nor let us con-
 tent ourselves with confessing and making
 humble acknowledgment of our sinfulness
 before God, but let us follow it with re-
 doubling our diligence and activity for
 God, in our respective stations and rela-
 tions in life. As ministers, let us be
 more faithful, earnest, zealous, warm and
 pathetic, in our addresses to the souls of
 men; let us wrestle more in private for
 our people, and search the scriptures with
 greater carefulness and prayer; let us study
 more, by our conversation and example, to
 promote vital religion, and gospel holi-
 ness; and let no temptations or difficulties
 “ move us, neither let us count our lives
 “ dear unto ourselves, so that we may
 “ finish our course with joy, and the mi-
 “ nistry which we have received of the

* Jer. xxxi. 18, 19.

“ Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the
 “ grace of God*.” As private Christians, let
 us be more circumspect in our walk, more
 spiritual in our converse, more humble
 and meek in our dispositions, more affec-
 tionate and beneficent to all around us,
 more watchful against temptation, more
 constant and fervent in our addresses to a
 throne of grace.—Let heads of families be
 more serious in their instructions, more
 strict in their restraints, more warm in
 their devotion, more lovely in their
 tempers, and more active, both by pre-
 cept and example, to promote the in-
 fluence of true religion among their chil-
 dren and domestics.—Let members of
 churches be more careful to fill up the
 duties of their relation, to walk with each
 other in the ordinances of the gospel, to
 pray for mutual prosperity, to “ hold fast
 the profession of their faith without
 “ wavering,” and to “ adorn the doctrine
 “ of God their Saviour in all things†.”—
 Let such, as have hitherto been neglecting
 the authority of Christ in his ordinances,
 be stirred up to holy chearful obedience,

* Acts xx. 24.

† Heb. x. 23. Tit. ii. 10.

“ giving

“ giving themselves up unto the Lord
 “ and to his church according to the will
 “ of God *.”—And “ let all that name
 “ the name of Christ” be more than ever
 concerned to “ depart from all ini-
 “ quity†.”—Blessed and happy, then,
 would the effects and consequences be to-
 wards us as a guilty people. The Lord
 would turn away from us the tokens of his
 displeasure. He would return and rejoice
 over us to do us good. Our insulting
 foes he would put to confusion. The
 clouds of judgment, that hang over us, he
 would speedily disperse. The Sun of
 prosperity would break forth with his en-
 livening beams. The gospel would again
 “ have free course, run and be glorified.”
 And the Lord God of Hosts would be
 unto us a shield, a sanctuary, a joy, and an
 exceeding great reward. Which I most
 earnestly pray may be the case, through
 Jesus Christ. Amen! and Amen!

* 2 Cor. viii. 5.

† 2 Tim. ii. 19.

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